

Children's responses to grief

Children experience the same kind of feelings of grief as adults do, but they may show it differently.

Nothing can prepare a child for how they may respond to grief. It may affect them physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually.

The following reactions are normal and a part of the healing process:

- Behaving younger than they are (e.g. thumb-sucking, bed-wetting, tantrums, clingy behaviour)
- Risk taking behaviours
- Getting into trouble
- Moping around
- Being withdrawn
- Physical symptoms (e.g. headaches, pains, stomach aches)
- Being passive
- Acting as if nothing has happened
- Being aggressive
- Being anxious or scared
- Difficulty in concentrating
- Change in appearance or attitude
- Crying
- Changes to sleep and eating patterns

Growing with grief

A child may never stop missing a loved one. The pain may gradually decrease and allow the child to grow with the loss. As the child develops they may feel the loss in different ways. Past losses may be revisited with a new loss.

About Calvary

Founded in 1885 by the Sisters of the Little Company of Mary, Calvary is a charitable, not-for-profit, Catholic health care organisation. Our mission is to provide quality, compassionate health care to the most vulnerable, including those reaching the end of their life. With over 18,000 staff and volunteers, we have a national network of 14 Public and Private Hospitals, 72 Residential Care and Retirement Communities and 19 Community Care service centres.

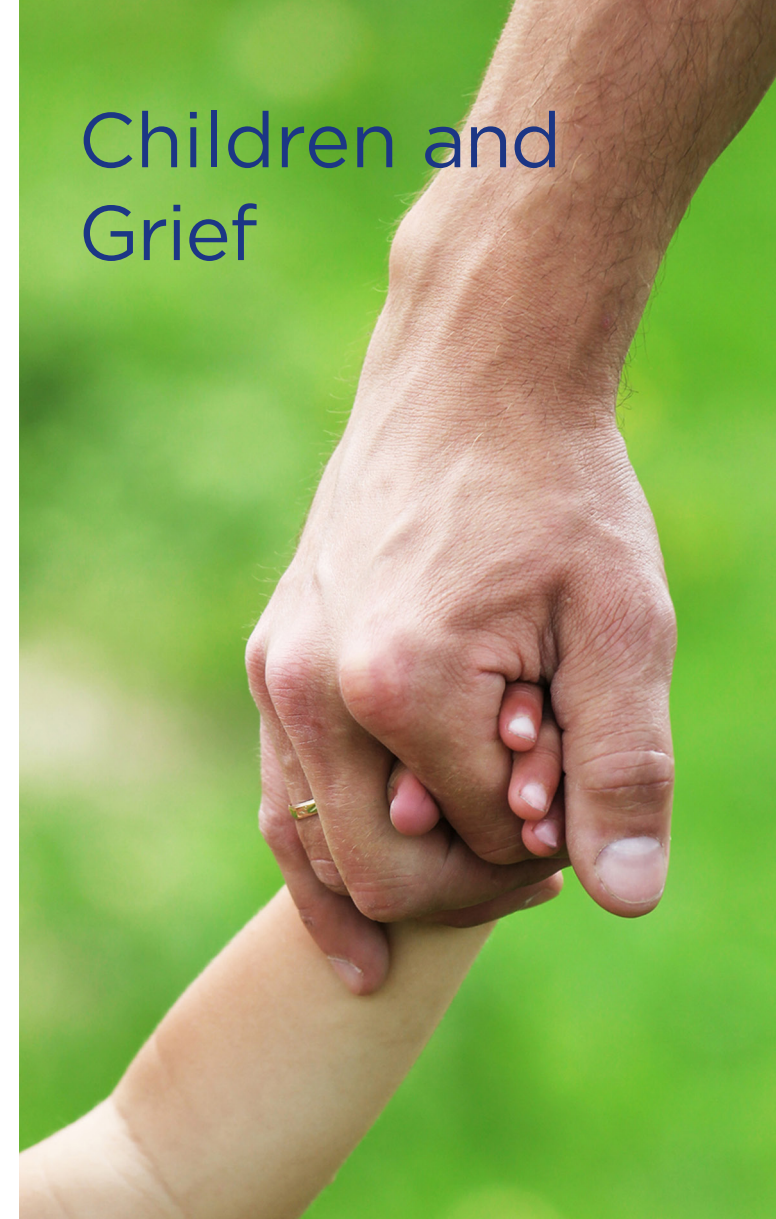


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Children and Grief



Mater Newcastle

Continuing the Mission of the Sisters of the Little Company of Mary

Calvary Mater Newcastle is a public hospital and a major cancer care centre within the Hunter New England Local Health District network.

Children and grief

Grief is a normal reaction to loss. Children (even babies) frequently understand more about loss than adults give them credit for. Losses may be the result of death but also when parents separate, friends move away, a pet dies, or they move house or school.

Grieving is a process that may take a very long time and cannot be hurried. Each child will express their grief in their own way and this will be influenced by their age.

The loss experienced by a child is often also experienced by their family and friends. Some children grieve openly from the start. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Most children's grief can be managed with appropriate family, community and cultural support.

Grieving children need:

- To feel safe
- To have their feelings acknowledged
- To be allowed to grieve in their own time and in their own way

How to help

- Listen and help them understand that grieving is normal.
- Don't judge the child's responses or beliefs.
- Give permission to grieve and encourage them to share feelings.
- Encourage the child to express their grief in words, play, music, art, etc.
- Be available.
- Give comfort appropriate to their needs (e.g. hugs, midnight chats, kicking a ball together, etc).
- Be patient and prepared to discuss what happened over and over again. This is important for very young children.
- Let the child be a child.
- Often children believe they caused or contributed to the loss and feel guilty.
- Be reassuring and explain that the loss is not the child's fault.
- A child's honesty can be confronting. Try to answer their questions honestly in a way they can understand. The words 'death' or 'loss' need to be used.
- Talk about the person who has died by name.
- Help the child(ren) to remember the funny, happy and ordinary times as well.
- When dealing with death, a memory box or book may be useful.
- Don't try to hide grief from the child(ren). This helps them to understand that grieving is a normal reaction.

If you are grieving too

- Avoid seeking support from your child(ren) in order to help you cope better.
- Seek assistance from people that your child(ren) respect to be special supports for them.
- Seek support to help you through your own grief.